Art or intimacy: assessing a disjunction

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> "I once tried to read *Resurrection* but couldn't. You see when Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader. When he turns his back to the reader then he seems most impressive. Perhaps one day we can talk about this."
>
> Wittgenstein, *Letter to Norman Malcolm*, 1945

Throughout the history of philosophical reflection on art we often find the thesis that art provides a special and intimate contact between author and spectator. Traditionally, we find two major justifications for this, the Expressionist and the Cognitivist. The first is found among a long strand of authors ranging from Leo Tolstoy to Jerrold Levinson:

> "[W]e may sometimes as listeners adopt the Expressionist assumption – that the emotion expressed in a particular piece belongs to its composer's biography – while imagining ourselves to be possessed of the full emotion whose feeling has been aroused within us. If we do so we are in effect imagining that we are sharing in the precise emotional response of another human being, the man or woman responsible for the music we hear. This, as Tolstoy so well appreciated, carries with it a decided reward – the reward of intimacy – which accrues whether the emotion is positive or negative in tone."[1]

1. Jerrold Levinson. "Music and Negative Emotion." in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (1982), 342.

Arguably, the best possible formulation of this notion is to be found in Robin Collingwood: we know the artist is expressing her feelings because her work allows us to express our own feelings.

The second strand could be traced back at least to Kant. In the absence of an external conditioning that ultimately provides the basis for attributing an objective truth-value, judgments of taste are the signs of a special "agreement" ["Übereinstimmung"] between the faculties of imagination and understanding, which anticipates the agreement between members of a community of taste and the awareness that we share a *sensus communis* and a common cognitive architecture. That is why Kant describes the judgment of taste, first of all as a vindication, a "Forderung" demanding compliance from our fellow beings:

> "Whenever we make a judgment declaring something to be beautiful, we permit no one to hold a different opinion, even though we base our judgment only on our feeling rather than on concepts; hence we regard this underlying feeling as a common rather than as a private feeling. But if we are to use this common sense in such a way, we cannot base it on experience; for it seeks to justify us in making judgments that contain an ought: it does not say that everyone *will* agree with my judgment, but that he *ought* to."[2]

In the process, we reach a closer contact to other human beings within a community of taste, which includes, of course, a sense of intimacy with the creative genius.

Common to both the Expressionist and the Cognitivist standpoints is the notion according to which art provides one of the closest possible contacts between human beings. This peculiar sense of communion may be described at a purely communicational level and perceived as a way by which we attain a profound awareness of our common humanity – the basis for the "universal communicability of judgments of taste", following Kant's formula. But it may also inspire us to adopt a quasi-erotic explanation of aesthetic experience. In fact, to be involved, often for quite some time, with someone who seems to share our perspective on reality and was capable of recreating and making available that perspective to others - through psychological interaction of fictional characters, musical forms in expressive motion, or enlightening visual compositions - happens to be one of the most exciting and valuable parts of our lives, of our social life, and indeed a way of

2. Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987, 89 (§22).

setting aside an eventual feeling of loneliness, both emotional as intellectual, as David Foster Wallace explains:

> "There's another level [on which] a piece of fiction is a conversation. There's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer that's very strange and very complicated and hard to talk about. ... There's a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. It doesn't happen all the time. It's these brief flashes and flames, but I get that sometimes. I feel unalone— intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don't with other art."[3]

When we try to elucidate what may prompt us to feel this special kind of contact with the author, four possible explanations come to mind. The first, eventually the most common one, alludes to the sharing of convictions and desires propounded by the author, which implies that we are offered a privileged access to her consciousness. It could very well be a reasonable explanation if indeed there was a coincidence between the convictions and desires manifested in the work and those of the author. But that is not necessarily the case. For quite some time now, philosophers have been debating the controversial thesis of the "implicit author", i.e., the *ad hoc* author either generated by the real author as an authorial persona, or deduced by the reader as she reads and interprets the work. If indeed we are dealing with an implicit, often fabricated, author, then this first approach does not seem very promising, if we want to justify that *A-ha! feeling* that David Foster Wallace was writing about.

A second way goes about by describing a special attraction to the author's personality. But here again, admitting the existence of an implicit author opposes to this path of analysis.

A third take, arguably a more promising one, would follow that which Jerrold Levinson calls "the Expressive Potency" spawned by artworks in the mind of those who experience them:

> "If one begins to regard music as the expression of one's own current emotional state, it will begin to seem as if it issues from oneself, as if it pours forth from one's innermost being. It is then very natural for one to receive an impression of expressive power—of freedom and ease in externalizing and

3. Laura Miller. "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace." Conversations with David Foster Wallace. Ed. Stephen J. Burn. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 58–65, 62.

> embodying what one feels. The sense one has of the richness and spontaneity with which one's inner life is unfolding itself, even where the feelings involved are of the negative kind, is a source of undeniable joy."[4]

The chance to share this Expressive Potency seems to result in a stronger explanation for the feeling of intimacy between author and spectator. After all, we may appraise someone else's convictions and desires without the need to share them or to feel somehow close to the one who entertains them. And we don't need to believe that we are in contact with the implicit personality of an author in order to enjoy her expressive potency, i.e., in order to believe that, if we were indeed to enjoy the expressive powers of the author, her freedom, swiftness and grace of expression, we would have expressed a given emotional or intellectual idea in exactly the same way as she.

Nevertheless, the Expressive Potency Hypothesis does not seem to account for the A-ha! experience mentioned by Foster Wallace. According to his reconstruction of the experience of listening to music expressive of emotions, the listener first tends to hypostasize the existence of a "music's persona"[5] acting as a bearer of emotions; subsequently, she occupies the role of this agent, as if she were the music's author; and finally, she acknowledges that the piece has a distinct author with whom she engages on a deep communication. This inversion of the phenomenology one might consider closer to that of the common listener (first, full awareness of the work's authorship and only then – and even so only episodically – the juxtaposition of author and listener) has the bizarre consequence of dissipating the spirit of communion, because the real author emerges as emanating from the listener herself.

This leads us to a fourth, and eventually more promising, path of analysis. This final path looks for the causes of "Authorial Connectedness"[6] in the cognitive or psychological context involving the experience of the artwork, often compared to a kind of "conversation" that activates comprehension protocols that are quite similar to those we employ in our daily speech acts. We shall proceed by following this method of analysis and, in particular, by considering its application to the case of film.

1. Conversational models in fictional film

While dismissing John Ruskin's proposal according to which aesthetic experience could be compared to a kind of friendship, Marcel Proust distinguished between "conversation" and "reading" and insis-

4. Jerrold Levinson. "Music and negative emotion.", 328-329, cf. 342.

5. Jerrold Levinson. "Music and negative emotion.", 341.

6. John Holiday. "Emotional intimacy in literature." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58-1 (2018), 1.

ted that the special intimacy established between reader and writer had to do with the fact that this was a "communication within loneliness".[7] Because she is alone, the reader may become involved with someone else's "communicative vehicle" in a much more intense way than what could be expected from an actual conversation, "continuing to use the intellectual powers of solitude that any conversation immediately dissipates, continuing to be inspired, to carry on this fertile labour of the spirit over itself".[8] Paradoxically, this would lead – as Proust subsequently demonstrates – to a sense of a superior, non-conversational, "union" with someone else's thought.

Nevertheless, the idea that art opens up a special kind of intimacy between author and spectator through some sort of respondent-free conversation is still being pursued today, and namely by conversational models applied to the experience of fiction, and in particular fictional film. Two models stand out in this context: Paul Grice's intention-response model of communication, and the Relevance Theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, which has also evolved out of Grice's seminal work.[9] They both share the notion that communication involves not only the transmission of information but also the act of *making clear the intention of transmitting that information*, sometimes including the way that transmission is produced and how it should be received. The recognition of this intention by the spectator may be relatively simple but may also imply sophisticated interpretation mechanisms, which, once consummated, may indeed produce in the viewer a sense of a privileged contact with the film director.

1.2. Categorical intentions

Some of the most promising contemporary approaches to film theory partake the idea that watching film is very much like following a conversation or trying to make sense of someone else's behaviour.[10] When you go out to the movies or whenever you zap your way through the cable channels in your hotel room, you are aware that you are watching the product of several intentional agents (directors, photogra-

7. Marcel Proust. *Sur la Lecture*. Québec: La Bibliothèque Électronique du Québec. 35.

8. Proust. *Sur la Lecture*. 35.

9. Grice, Paul. "Meaning." *The Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 377–88; Dan, Sperber and Wilson, Deirdre. "Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading." *Mind and Language* 17 (1-2) (2002): 3-23.

10. Cf.; Alessandro Pignocchi. *Pourquoi aime-t-on un film?*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2015; Francis Sparshott. "Vision and Dream in the Cinema." *Philosophic Exchange* 2-1 (1971): 111-122.

phers, actors, stage designers, etc.). Thus, you spontaneously activate the daily cognitive tools you normally use to attribute mental states to the people with which you interact. In a way it is a process similar to that of making sense of a conversation in which a certain event is described. By assessing your respondent's intentions, you use your experienced ability to integrate that round of information, relatively aware that it may include distortions, ellipses, ambiguities and false clues.[11]

Reception and interpretation of film is constituted, to a large extent, by the way we spontaneously reconstruct the *intentional agenda* that framed its inception. Therefore, no matter how diverse the reception of a film may be, it remains nevertheless true that the original intentions behind the film constitute an external criterion for judging which ways of watching the film are valid and fair, and which are not. A fairer reception and interpretation of the film will make the viewer's decoding of the author's intentions look more plausible, and the viewer's propensity to attribute a more and more rich set of intentions to the author improves her own powers of interpretation – even if some (probably most) attributions are later abandoned as incongruent. The fact that spectators are often involved in this kind of intention detection and response explains why so many of the terms we use to evaluate film are intentional concepts: "sincere", "subtle", "heavy", "light", "pretentious", "didactic", "bold", etc.[12]

This presupposition is highly debatable if by "original intentions" we are merely referring to the "authorial intentions", i.e., the set of intentions related to the film's content (e.g., its philosophical, moral or political viewpoint, or its characters' psychology). It becomes much more consensual if we are more broadly referring to the "categorical intentions", i.e., the author's intentions about the way the work should be viewed, like its specific category or genre: documentary or fictional film, family drama or romantic comedy, etc.[13] To make sure that we are receiving and interpreting the work in a fair way is quite important because it will provide the attribution of mental states to the author with higher explanatory traction.

Categorical intentions determine the film's *ontology*, i.e., they establish the category to which the film belongs and therefore prescribe a given viewing stance. For instance, if some film is identified as belonging to the category of "documentaries", viewers will try to assess the film's information according to the veracity patterns that are valid

11. Sparshott. "Vision and dream." 121.

12. Cf. Pignocchi. *Pourquoi*. 26.

13. Carroll, Noël. "Fiction, non-fiction, and the film of presumptive assertion: a conceptual analysis." *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. 173-202.

for the scientific domain where the documentary takes place (History, Neurology, Theory of Tectonic Plaques, etc).[14] If, on the other hand, a given film is identified as a work of fiction, the viewer will activate a "suppositional stance" and treat that information as the product of the author's imagination. Once that categorical intention is established, we may proceed with the task of attributing mental states to the author that are, to some extent, (a) shareable by the viewer and (b) may explain some of the film's diegetic or stylistic options.

To a large extent, as Sperber and Wilson have shown, interpreting an artwork by attributing mental states to its author is based on the same mechanisms that we commonly use to decipher the behaviour of those with whom we interact. In particular, we use a set of tools designated by the Relevance Principle. This is a cognitive principle that prompts us to make salient the most relevant information in our interpretative conclusions, i.e., that information that allows us to withdraw the most important cognitive rewards based on the most moderate or economic interpretative effort.

A more efficient presentation of the Relevance Principle requires that we break it down into some its sub-modules, those that seem more conducive to an alternative justification for the sense of intimacy between author and spectator.

a) Presumption of Optimal Relevance

This is a presumption that aids the sender to prepare an act of communication according to these guidelines:

"My respondent tacitly accepts as a given that the information I'm trying to convey will provide her with cognitive benefits that correspond to the efforts she must undertake in order to understand that information."[15]

Therefore, this work of identifying what is pertinent implies an assessment of the ratio between (a) the effort required in order to gather the most relevant information and the greater amount of cognitive gains, and (b) the quality (or relevance) of the information being conveyed. Elementary or basic information – like traffic signs - should be conveyed in the most straightforward way. Complex and demanding

14. Carroll, Noël. "From Real to Reel: Entangled in Nonfiction Film." Theorizing the Moving Image. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 224-252.

15. Pignocchi. *Pourquoi*, 55.

information (like a sophisticated philosophical insight) calls for a complex and demanding configuration of the communicative support. According to the Relevance Principle, the complex work of decoding any message is based on the attribution of mental states to the author as a way to explain her communicative intention. And this gradual approach to the author's mentation supposes a significant degree of intimacy between sender and receiver.

An example may help to show how Optimal Relevance organizes our viewing experience of film. Consider the beginning of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Marion (Janet Leigh) drives away from her office with an envelope full of cash, which she should have deposited in the bank. Ellipsis. On the following scene, Marion is in her room and has changed her outfit. The camera points towards the bed and zooms into an envelope full of cash and then into a suitcase filled with clothes. The viewer recalls the innuendos and soft recrimination from the first scene's dialogue between Marion and Sam Loomis (John Gavin). She then picks up as the most relevant interpretation that Marion is stealing the money and leaving town to join her lover. An alternative and equally plausible interpretation would be that that this is Marion's money and that she is just packing her bag for a weekend out. However, the indexical movement of the camera underpins a more relevant meaning of the two objects and acts as a cue prompting the viewer (a) to choose the interpretation which affords the greatest cognitive benefit since it allows for a richer set of information regarding Marion's motives and personality; (b) to establish a tone of connivance between director and spectator, made even more intense because it is settled in front of Marion's half naked body, bordering on voyeurism.

Sometimes, the relevance of such information is not immediately clear but the director's insistence causes the viewer to recognize a tacit request for remembering that detail. This is the case with the origamis that Edward James Olmos' character in *Blade Runner* is constantly creating and that Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) discovers in the final scene of the movie – curiously enough, the same origamis are still useful to identify the aged character (and actor) in the recent sequel, some 35 years later.

The film as a whole may be assumed as a communicative act that affords the viewer more or less significant and lasting cognitive gains. Films share a kind of "promise of relevance" that explain much of the sympathetic or even complacent way we go to them, expecting rewards that may not be *a priori* obvious.

b) Over-attribution of mental states

The attribution of mental states is even more appealing when it is based upon very elusive cues. In fact, upon any interaction with a stranger, we tend towards the attribution of transitory mental states ("He asked me for information about the location of building X because he's not a local and is probably late for a meeting"). But in order to justify these mental states we immediately attribute "structural mental states", and contrive a kind of ad hoc "anticipation structure" (Moreno) that forms an instantaneous putative personality with which we can deal ("He is a nice and extrovert person", "He is highly conscientious because he wants to make sure he won't arrive late", etc.). And these are the scaffoldings of intimacy. We are then constantly "over-interpreting" other people by "over-attributing" mental states without paying too much attention to whether that attribution is justified or even reasonable.

"Over-attribution" of structural mental states plays a significant role in building up the author's *style*. For instance, one may easily conclude that there is a falsely *didactic* side to Hitchcock's style. In the scene just mentioned, he hands out to the viewer cues in a complicit way, and his showing is full of ironic and somewhat moralistic remarks – the chaos in Marion's suitcase speaks louder than the act of stealing.

The attribution of mental states also plays a significant role in identifying the different functions fulfilled by each property of the film. And it may prompt the viewer to attribute functions to properties albeit she knows that the property was not designed with that purpose in mind (Wilhelm Dilthey's definition of hermeneutics as the effort of knowing the author better than she knows herself seems to echo here). For instance, according to French critic Jean Douchet, the tree against which the character of Abraham Lincoln (Henry Fonda) rests his feet, in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939), symbolizes justice, even though there is no documented justification for attributing that symbolic intention to John Ford. [16]

However, this sounds a bit contradictory: if we attribute properties to manifest properties of the film even though we know that not part of the author's mentation when designing the work, what is then more important in the viewer's experience: the identification of functions or the (reasonable) attribution of mental states?

Holders of this view may argue that films, like many other artefacts, are conceived without a predefined idea of the function they shall fulfil: John Ford could have picked up another object but we may ima-

16. Cf. Pignocchi. *Pourquoi*, 69.

gine that there was an unconscious connection between the properties of the tree and those of justice that may have assisted him to make this choice. We don't need solid proofs in order to attribute mental states to another human being. The notion of "function" is useful in this context because it covers all the "hypothetical causal factors" that take place on an intentional process – like that of directing a movie – much beyond the content of a clearly conscious and controlled intention. Naturally, this allows for the attribution of unconscious mental states to the author, "trying to know her better than she knows herself", states that would even resist a verbal denial from the artist. But is this ascription permissible or justifiable?

c) Objectives – means – constraints

Part of the method we use to attribute mental states during interpretation consists in identifying and weighing the objectives, means and constraints that conditioned the author's creative process.[17] And that is also the basis for organizing our knowledge of artefacts: "an artefact is a means planned to reach a certain objective considering a certain number of constraints". Any modification of one of the three determines the modification of the others. Take the case of happy endings imposed by the major Hollywood studios on dissenting film directors like Nicholas Ray. Despite the bitterness and pessimism that permeates the entire movie, *Bigger than Life* (1956) ends on a positive note, with the character of James Mason and his family at the hospital believing that he is cured. This closure, however, is highly improbable because we know that this character will continue to take cortisone as part of his fight against chronic pain. Given the "happy ending" constraint imposed by the studio and the objective of making the viewer realize the frail basis of the common bourgeois sense of happiness, the properties of the film (means to that objective) are reconsidered and the weight of previous segments of the movie (like the scene where the son shows his father a deflated football) clearly accentuates the fake finale. The hospital room where James Mason is rejoined by his family looks bare and uncomfortable, more of a prison cell than an actual hospital

17. Experiments with children have shown that from very early on we interpret other people's behaviour through an inferential system that correlates objectives, means and constraints. After watching a grownup carrying grocery bags in both hands switch on the light with her forehead, the child shall nevertheless switch on the light herself with her hands and not with her forehead, because it is easier. That is, she understands that the primary objective of the grownup was to switch on the light but due to obvious constaints she has decided to use alternative means. (Cf. Meltzoff, Andrew. "Infant imitation after a 1-week delay: Long term memory for novel acts and multiple stimuli." *Developmental Psychology* 24 (4) (1988).

bedroom, and especially we can't help feeling that there is something ominous about the shadow of the hospital lamp constantly intruding on the faces of this reunited family.

Thus, the properties of the film are perceived as means towards an objective after subtracting all constraints.

d) Implicit and explicit functional reception

For the most part of her viewing experience, the spectator is unaware of the functions played by the film's properties. Camera movements, for instance, are planned so as to remain out of the normal viewer focus of attention. They produce an effect over the viewer and she implicitly accepts this as its function without reflecting about its special significance or speculating about the director's special motivation to do so.[18] They remain at the level of *implicit functional reception*. Some properties, however, were included in the film without any implicit function, i.e., without having any implicit effect over the viewer and could remain unnoticed without affecting the viewing experience. However, when made explicit through *explicit functional reception* – usually, the work of film critics or scholars – they end up altering even our implicit reception. For instance, almost imperceptible to the common viewer, Hitchcock used a green filter when filming two scenes of Vertigo: the scene where Scottie (James Stewart) follows Maddie (Kim Novak) in the graveyard and discovers Carlotta Valdes' tomb, and the scene where Judy Barton (Kim Novak) comes out of the bathroom transformed back as Madeleine Elster. She is literally rising "d'entre les morts" as the original title of the novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac suggested and the green filter underlines. We require that this property be made explicit in order to better identify its function, i.e., we need to acknowledge the similar greenish tone of both scenes to grasp the symbolic connection between both scenes. Discovering this kind of "Easter eggs" is another motivation for attributing a distinct array of mental states to the director in the way she plays and manipulates functional roles or the rules of the genre.

Sometimes, the explicit functional reception becomes an obstacle to the implicit reception. Take the case, for instance, of Jacques Rivette's criticism of Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kappo* and particularly the scene where Pontecorvo does a travelling over the corpse of an electrocuted prisoner, which inspired Rivette to write his famous article on film and moral abjection.[19] The usually unnoticed function of the trave-

18. Cf. Pignocchi. *Pourquoi*, 79.

19. Jacques Rivette. "De l'abjection." *Cahiers du Cinéma* 120 (1961).

lling is made explicit in Rivette's abhorrence towards the beautification of horror. And after making explicit that perverse function of the travelling, it is hard to watch the film without some degree of discomfort.

Much more seldom, however, directors refer explicitly to functions that normally remain implicit. This is the case when, for instance, normal accepted procedures are manipulated or altered, in such a way that drawing attention to the functional role of those common procedures affects their usual implicit functional reception, producing a kind of "psychical distance" that significantly increases the sense of complicity between director and viewer. Take the extreme case of Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) and the scene where the kidnapped wife finally reaches for the riffle and shoots one of the kidnappers. The other perpetrator then seizes the TV remote control, points at the camera and rewinds the film back until the moment the riffle is at hand, preventing this time that the weapon is seized by the woman. The way the regular temporal sequence is altered and its manipulation becomes possible intradiegetically adds to the desperation of the scene and, paradoxically, makes it more intense while at the same time its irony makes the author more present in the spectator's experience.

Since our attention mode is always on the clear looking for cues, the filmmaker's shift between the explicit and the implicit modes of reception, entice furthermore the viewers' ability to attribute mental states.

e) Resisting verbalization

Most significant in this context is to consider communicative acts in film that resist verbalization. The sharing of these phenomenological or purely sensorial elements adds to the sense of communion between director and viewer, particularly if their full significance remains to some extent undetermined. Consider, for instance, the sequence in *Psycho* immediately after the famous Shower Scene, when Hitchcock shows us the folded newspaper where Marion has stashed the stolen money, after showing us the bathtub draining hole and Marion's dead eye (and before showing us Norman Bates' house through the bedroom window). The sequence seems to encase a clear moralistic message. But there are also visual motives that make it more alluring and enigmatic. There is a spiral motive common to the three shots – the draining hole, the dead eye and the closed newspaper - and a playing with visual textures, an allusion to something that is being folded, hidden, about to disappear (the water, Marion, and the fact that we never hear about the money again in the film). There is also an intriguing passage from

the humidity of the bathtub to the drying dead eye of Marion and to the complete dryness of the newspaper, a passage from life to death. But how can we paraphrase this given that the visual dimension is so dense? In common conversations there are also many communicative segments that resist verbalization, gestures, prosody, bodily interaction. In order to distinguish between these segments and those that are clearly linguistic, the Relevance Theory introduces the notion of "communication strength": strong moments in communication are paraphraseable and weak moments are not. Consequently, it is much more difficult to attribute mental states on the basis of the latter. However, whenever this attribution is attempted and thought to be accomplished, a sense of increased intimacy with the author is attained.

Many times the meaning of a segment seems clear (like the shot of Marion's newspaper) but it is only when we try to paraphrase it that we realize how difficult this is (and how difficult it is to attribute the author a specific mental state, as if she was turning her back on us). The Relevance Theory doesn't seem able to explain why sometimes the author chooses to produce weak communicative acts - like metaphors, hyperboles, gestures or facial expressions - when she could, after all, make it easier for the respondent to verbalize the content. An alternative explanation would be to say that art – film, in particular – is based on and extends our ability to communicate in a "weak" way, allowing us to externalize and reconstruct mental states that resist proper verbalization. Even further: any artistic object that seems easily paraphraseable - by making it easy to describe its author's mental states, for instance – doesn't seem, therefore, particularly significant: it is vulgar, pedestrian, didactic. And we are not motivated to seek intimacy with the obvious.

2. Conversational Interpretation and Intentionalism

Naturally, the topic of intimacy between author and audience leads to the haunting issue of Intentionalism in aesthetic appreciation. Is the Relevance Theory a kind of intentionalist theory of filmic interpretation? For sure, many of the authors advocating that consideration of the author's original intentions is the proper way to interpret fiction justify their position through the fundamental claim that all aesthetic transaction is "conversational", i.e., that it involves a deeply embedded motivation to reach a sense of community: "a generic human interest in communicating with others".[20]

20. Carroll, Noël. "Art, intention and conversation." *Intention & Interpretation*. Ed. Gary Iseminger. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992. 97-131. 118.

The analogy between art appreciation and conversation traditionally faces numerous perils.[21] As Proust's distinction between "conversation" and "reading" already demonstrated, author and spectator don't share the same time frame, and therefore there is nothing remotely close to the interaction involved in literal conversations. Also, the spectator's focus of attention is the artwork and not the author whereas in a literal conversation the focus is on the person producing the speech, rather than on the speech. Since there is no bidirectional exchange of information, there is no possibility to correct misunderstandings, and that one-sidedness also creates a blatant asymmetry between the active author and the passive spectator. Finally, as the famous case of Kafka's final decision of burning all of his unprinted papers seems to imply, artistic creation does not necessarily emerge out of a desire for communication. It may simply arise from a peculiar à la Collingwood need for (self-)expression.

The major divide here is then between those who take art to be deeply intertwined with people's lives, serving as a kind of existential clarification, and those who adopt a more detached, some would say hedonistic, view of art.[22] "Conversationalists" are committed to the first perspective.

Naturally, for this "human interest" to be genuine, we should be looking for interpretations of the work that preserve both the "mutual respect we have for our interlocutor", the author, but "also [be] based on an interest in protecting our sense of self-respect in the process of conversation".[23] This is the position held by Actual Intentionalists who restrict proper interpretation to a cumulative effort towards deducing the *real* intentions of the *real* author.

The case against Actual Intentionalism is a complex and highly problematic one and exceeds the purpose of this paper. Suffice it to say that probably the best argument against Intentionalism comes under the form of a dilemma: either the author's intentions are fulfilled in the work, and one doesn't need to refer to them (nor is one motivated to do so); or intentions were not achieved in the work, in which case refer-

21. Cf. Levinson, Jerrold. "Artful Intentions." *Aesthetic Pursuits – Essays in Philosophy of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 133-145, 142. Livingston, Paisley. *Art and Intention – A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

22. Noël Carroll reduces critics of conversational models, and anti-intentionalists in general, to aesthetic hedonism. He uses Robert Nozick's antihedonistic thought experience to disprove these critics' "philosophical framework": no one would plug herself into Nozick's "machine for life" because "we wish to be a certain kind of person and do various things and not just have experiences as if we were such a person and as if we were doing those things" (Carroll. "Art, Intention." 122).

23. Carroll. "Art, intention." 119.

ring to them is useless if the purpose is to grasp the work's meaning. To escape the dilemma, one may adopt a kind of *conditionalist intentionalism* (Paisley Livingston), describing the "intentions" that the author might have had, but leaving undetermined whether she has actually had them. This is where conversational models such as the Relevance Theory seem to fit. After all, attributing mental states to an interlocutor makes particular sense in cases where the message is not clear and actual intentions are dubious or misleading.

It all comes down to a fundamental choice between respecting the epistemic consistency of the work, its authorial *truth*, or increasing its aesthetic worth by multiplying interpretive paths, which is often perceived as a fundamental factor of aesthetic satisfaction. However, if we adopt the latter, value-maximizing and intention-deprecating, position, are we still susceptible to that sense of "friendship" described by Wayne Booth in *The Company we Keep*? Can we feel intimacy towards an interpretive chimera such as Wayne Booth's implicit author?[24]

Where does the "author" come from? On what grounds do we reason to conclude there is a special alignment between her worldview and our deepest intuitions? Two sources seem obvious: the Biography and the Oeuvre. Actual Intentionalism insists in the need to align the author's biography with our understanding of the work, a daunting task in most cases, as shown by the recurrent gallery of counterexamples of anonymous artworks or elusive authors that reduce this position to an Intentional Fallacy.

However, data extracted from the Oeuvre - with the aid of pragmatic techniques such as those disclosed by the Relevance Theory, for instance – can be relevant and enlightening within the strict understanding of, say, a film's *fabula* by providing an "explicative interpretation".[25] In this sense, more than someone with whom we entertain a conversation, the author / director is someone who is watching the film with us, so to speak, and her opinions on what is going on are no more significant than those of any other competent viewer. But if this is so then the degree of commitment and intimacy felt towards the author, if any, is completely different.

In order to keep on believing such intimacy constitutes an important component of aesthetic response we would need a *theory of the author* which is both immune to the perils and dilemmas of Actual

24. Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep. Ethical Criticism and the Ethics of Reading*. Berkeley: California University Press, 1988.

25. In the sense proposed by George Wilson who tries to overcome the criticism of David Bordwell against the kind of interpretative intentionalism developed by New Criticism: Wilson, George. "On film narrative and narrative meaning." *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. 219-238.

Intentionalism and consistent enough to acknowledge a strong sense of intimacy that simply does not seem plausible once we adopt weaker versions of authorship, such as Hypothetical Intentionalism, the Implicit Author Hypothesis, or the Value-Maximing Theory.[26]

Let us call this the Spectral Author Theory. The Theory postulates an author that emerges out of the Oeuvre – and is therefore a working hypothesis – but retains either a strong *reminiscence* of or prompts a *projection* towards the real author, strong enough for the reader / viewer to feel varying degrees of closeness, despite the suppositional dimension of the experience. First, because the intensity of the work is inevitably linked to the intensity of the moment of its creation, and second because there are clear limits to what the real author could be pretending at that moment.

Whenever the viewer attempts to reconstruct the author's psychological *persona*, namely by the attribution of mental states, there are tangible and verifiable limits to that which the author can fake and also limits to that which the audience may reasonably assume that is being faked. Simply put, there are some traits that cannot simply be faked:

> "[When the author] is perceptive, sensitive, emotionally mature and the like, *there seems to be little sense in the supposition that the artist has, by an act of pretence, embodied these characteristics in a work although he himself was not possessed of them*. The judgment that the work is these things is the judgment that the author *there* exhibited those qualities (though he might not otherwise exhibit them in the responses of his or her non-literary life)."[27]

There are limits to the author's ability to pretend. For instance, it seems very unlikely that someone could merely *pretend* to be sensitive at the exact moment when she is expressing sensivity. We may then conclude that if the author's style or mode of expression reveals sensitivity, the author *was*, at least at that particular creative moment, a sensitive being. It is quite doubtful that someone could adopt a mode of expression while merely entertaining that mode of expression, making it run *offline*, so to speak, in a way it does not resemble in the very least

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26. On Hypothetical Intentionalism: Currie, Gregory. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Levinson, Jerrold. "Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism." Aesthetic Pursuits – Essays in Philosophy of Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 146-162. On the Implicit Author Hypothesis; Kindt, Tom and Müller, Hans Harald. *The Implied Author – Concept and Controversy*. Berlin: De Gruyter. 2006; On the Value Maximizing Theory: Davies, Stephen. "Author's intentions, literary interpretation, an literary value." Philosophical Perspectives on Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 166-190.

27. Colin Lyas, 'The Relevance of the Author's Sincerity', in Peter Lamarque (ed.), *Philosophy and Fiction: Essays in Literary Aesthetics*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1983, 22.

to the mode in which she expresses herself or communicates in real life.

Therefore, if this does not justify authorial intimacy with the full extent of the author's biography (but when does this ever happen in real life anyway?), at least it seems to validate a special contact with *the author just as she was at the very moment she was writing, paiting, or directing*, i.e., the Spectral Author, a deduced but significant presence.[28] The sheer intensity of the aesthetic moment leads the spectator to the realization of the intensity of the creative moment and, ultimately, prompts in her this special sense of intimacy. Once we assume the artistic practice as a distinctively concentrated and committed episode in the author's life, we assume that each characteristic of the work we have reason to believe was controlled by the author was indeed planned as something worth experiencing.[29] The fact that we recognize that worth is sufficient to prompt a feeling of closeness whatever attitude may accompany it (from feeling indebted to feeling envious of the extraordinary ability required to convey such an experience). And even if we hold good reasons for believing that the real author does not match the Spectral Author, the work's intensity should impress us to believe that, *at the moment of creation*, the real author was in consonance with the implicit author, appreciating her mode of expression and convictions. This seems to be the link that still justifies the hypothesis of authorial intimacy, albeit a much weaker link than that envisaged by David Foster Wallace.

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28. John Holiday names this special feeling of intimacy the "expressive authorial connectedness" (in Holiday. "Emotional intimacy." 10).

29. "[T]he practice of art, as an intensely focused and reflective making, gives a default warrant for the rest of us to take nearly every mark, every feature that we think could be controlled by the artist, as evidence of something the artist found to be worth experiencing." (in Eileen John, 'Beauty, Interest, and Autonomy', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, 2012, 200).

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